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Leadership in Turbulent Times (Indianapolis)

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**January 30, 2007
C. William Pollard**

“Leadership in Turbulent Times”

I am delighted to be with you today and share some thoughts about the opportunities and challenges we have as Christians and leaders in business to serve in dynamic and changing markets.

We live in a world of accelerated change and choice. It was Dickens who said: “It is the best of times and the worst of times.” Although he wrote this years ago about the struggle in *The Tale of Two Cities*, he may well have been writing it about the world we live in today.

There is much about what is occurring around us that is exciting and pregnant with opportunity. On the other hand, the forces of globalization and conflicts resulting from terrorism and the various expressions of radical religious beliefs are alarming. And then there are those ever present changes in our markets that affect the growth of our businesses.

You may be sitting here today wondering about what is happening to your market niche of selling Christian books. Will portions of the market keep moving to the big box retailers? Will there be a growing demand to

buy Christian books online? Will church stores be a growing factor in my market? How will Barna's projection of a growing trend toward alternate methods of experiencing and expressing faith affect the demand for Christian books or changes in the buying patterns of my customers? These may represent only a few of the business questions you may be facing.`

As I share with you from some of my experiences, I do not come with all the answers nor do I have a simple formula or five-step process for success. However, I may have faced some of the questions you are facing and/or walked down some of the roads that you may be traveling. In my journey, I have found that identifying the question is often more important than knowing all the answers and that God works and often speaks during times of ambiguity and adversity.

As I say this, I am reminded of a greeting that a friend of mine uses on his voice mail and answering machine. It simply says the following: Hello. This is not just a voice mail or an answering machine. It is a questioning device. There are really only two questions in life that are relevant: "Who are you?" and "What do you want?" Please give your answer at the tone.

What would be our answer to these questions? Who are we and what do we want? Most of us here have senior leadership responsibilities in our business. Some of us have the title of President or CEO after our name. We

often identify who we are by our job or title. But is that who we really are? What do we expect out of life – out of our business – from our families – from our faith? What is the relationship between the God we worship on Sunday and the profit we make on Monday? What did Jesus mean when He said: “No man can serve two Masters?” Is there a virtue in profit? How does God fit into our business?

While 30 years ago it was generally considered that business and religion don’t mix, there is now an open dialog in the marketplace about issues of faith and the role of God in business.

In a book recently published by Oxford University Press entitled “God at Work”, David Miller, the Executive Director of the Center for Faith and Culture at Yale University, a graduate of Princeton Seminary and a committed Christian, discusses this increased interest in spirituality in the work place. He concludes that there are a growing number of business people attending conferences and management seminars on the role of spirituality at work, participating in Bible studies at work, and also reading books, magazines, and newsletters for self-help training on how to relate biblical teaching with marketplace demands.

He notes that, for the most part, the church has been silent and non-responsive to this growing interest and desire among Christian business

people to close the Sunday/Monday gap. His study further indicates that to help fill this void of silence, there has been a rapidly growing number of supporting para church organizations. He estimates that there are now more than 1200 such organizations involved in the faith/work movement.

He also expresses disappointment with his finding that, in general, the teaching faculty at seminaries and other institutions offering biblical studies continue to have pre-suppositions about capitalism, business, and the marketplace, that range from being benign to negative. On the negative side, the views portray the business community as a necessary evil, unsupportive of social justice concerns, harmful and exploitative of people and the environment, and only interested in maximizing profits.

One of the most interesting books on this general subject is not written by a Christian or a person of religious authority, but instead by an economist who is a Nobel Prize winner and a professor at the University of Chicago. In his book entitled "*The Fourth Great Awakening*", Robert Fogel traces, from pre-Revolutionary War days to modern times, the various religious awakenings in America and their impact on our society and economy. As a secular observer, he has determined that one of the greatest issues in our society and the world of business today is a lack of a consensus of moral authority and a lack of what he refers to as a distribution of spiritual assets or

spiritual resources. He concludes that in order for the firm of the future to resolve the growing complexity of ethical issues, it will have to acquire spiritual capital.

What he is saying is something we already know as Christians, and that is, the health and welfare of people cannot be understood or measured only in terms of their economic or physical needs. Nor can it be measured solely by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. There also is a spiritual dimension to the human condition. It is this spiritual dimension that influences moral behavior and the development of character and is the genesis of love, not hate; good, not evil. It is this spiritual dimension of people that raises the question of God and His role in both the act of creation and the act of redemption.

The business firm need not be just a place where we make money and create wealth, but it can also become a moral community for the development of human character. A community where it is ok to talk about God and one's source for a moral authority.

As I have now retired from my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a return for our shareholders that on average was 20% per year. While these figures are part of a normal business

assessment of performance, the conclusion for me cannot be limited to these money or value-creation measurements. The real and lasting measurement is whether the results of my leadership can be seen in the changed and improved lives of people I led.

As a business leader, I wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I didn't want to play by these rules, I didn't belong in the ballgame. But I also tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community, where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of their faith with the demands of their work were issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning understanding and acceptance. I considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

Our corporate objectives at ServiceMaster were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We did not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's mix.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

One of the best ways that I found to share my faith and lead in the development of the spiritual as well as the economic side of the firm was to seek to serve as I led. As I did so, I was able to affirm that the interest of others came before mine and the truth of what I said and believed should be measured by what I did.

Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I joined ServiceMaster, now almost 30 years ago.

As I concluded my time on the faculty and in the administration at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited by Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of ServiceMaster, and Ken Wessner, who was the President and CEO of the Company, to consider

joining the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

During the recruiting process, the two Kens shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen's office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I needed to know more about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

So I started pressing the two Kens on what needed to be done and how long it would take for me to be President and CEO of this Company. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken Hansen stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: "Bill, the interview is over."

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I'd blown my opportunity and this was God's way of directing me back to the practice of law.

Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken's words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the

Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you'd better forget it.

Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. There were lessons for me to learn, including:

- Never give a title or position to somebody who can't live without it.
- Determine at the front end whether the leader's self-interest or the interest of others will come first.
- Know whether the leader can define reality by being willing to do what they ask of others.

And as I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a corporate vice president, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks we perform for our customers. In so doing, I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 12 million customers in 45 different countries. This experience often reminded me of my own imperfections and the need to admit my mistakes and ask for forgiveness and seek guidance from above.

Later on in my career, as I became CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and the wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

Servant leadership is what Jesus was seeking to teach His disciples as He took a towel and basin of water and washed their feet. Such leadership is not so much about the leader and his accomplishments. It is more about the people who follow and the direction they are headed. As we look at leadership this way, it is imperative for us as leaders:

- To know what we believe and why we believe it;
- To know where we are headed and why it is important for people to follow;
- To understand who people are and why they work and not just what they do and how they do it;
- To live and share our faith in a way that will engage people and not turn them off;
- To be an example in our private and public life of the Lord we love;

- To recognize that every person, regardless of the title or position, has been created in the image and likeness of God with dignity and worth and their own fingerprint of potential.

Joshua is one of those Biblical examples of a great leader. As he came to the closing days of his leadership, he called all of the tribes of Israel together and reminded them that, with God's help, they had been victorious in battles and were now occupying the Promised Land, living in cities they did not have to build and eating from vineyards they did not have to plant and then he challenged them to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – our work can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. The business firm, where we serve customers and make money, can become a center of worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

As I say this, I am reminded of two quotes from C. S. Lewis. One is from *The World's Last Night* when he was describing God as One who “allows the ... muscles and minds of men to cooperate in the execution of His will ... and who seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures” and the other is from *The Weight of Glory* when he said: “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – they are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit.”

God has called each of us to be in the world but not part of it. When we proclaim our faith and do not live it, we sow seeds of cynicism and rejection. But when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, businessperson, selling Christian books, a minister or educator, we can share and live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained.

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January 26, 2007